Historical Information about the Pittsfield Massachusetts Almshouse from the 1900 Municipal Report

My ancestors first came to Pittsfield in ~1850 and that has lead to much “research” into their lives and has revealed many interesting facts about Pittsfield’s past.
Clark W. Nicholls

1908 post card “Pittsfield in the near Future"
Page from: www.phs1968.com

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Almshouse 1900

CITY ALMSHOUSE 1899

CITY ALMSHOUSE 1897

1900

REPORT OF THE OVERSEERS OF THE POOR.

To His Honor, the Mayor, and the City Council of the City of Pittsfield:

Gentlemen:—The annual report of the Board of Overseers of the Poor for the year ending Dee. 31, 1899, is herewith respectfully submitted:—

During the earlier part of the past year, during the severe weather of the winter months, the list of families receiving aid was long, and the expense of caring for the out-door poor was very heavy—much heavier than it was for the corresponding period the previous year. But since spring, the expense has been lighter than it was the previous year, the coming of warm weather easing off the demand for fuel, and the starting up of several mills, and the general improvement of business in the city, furnishing employment for many. But the total expense has been, the past year, considerably heavier than it was the year before.

Early in the year, complaints of cruelty to the Almshouse inmates were made against Mr. Shaw. The board thoroughly investigated these charges, and found that there was no proof to substantiate them. Afterward, the city council investigated the matter by request, with practically the same result.

We want to call your attention to the fact that a large portion of appropriation for caring for the poor is used in earning for paupers who are really charges of other cities and towns, and the state. When this is paid back to this city, not one cent of it returns to the

poor fund, but it all is paid to the City Treasurer as belonging to the general funds of the city. The amount spent in this way the past year was $2,139.29.

ALMSHOUSE.

The almshouse inmates now number fifty-three, divided as follows: Sane men, twenty-two; sane women, ten; insane men, twelve; insane women, nine. There have been three persons sent from the Almshouse to state institutions the past year.

In regard to the insane, it may be said that an insane person is never received into the Almshouse, who has not first been to a state institution, and pronounced incurable, and in such a condition that he can be cared for as well at the Almshouse as in the state institution except by request of friends. The expense is much less in caring for them at the Almshouse. The number of insane persons from Pittsfield in state institutions during the past year was twenty-five costing $2,891.12.

During the year the board has increased the number of employees at the Almshouse by two—one male and one female. The employees there now number six, beside Mr. and Mrs. Shaw.

In regard to the water supply, we can only repeat what has been embodied in previous reports of this board, and included in reports of the City Physician.

But the system of drainage at the Almshouse must be changed. A large cesspool is now in use, but the soil is hardpan, and the cesspool fills faster than it empties. Some action on this matter must surely be taken during the coming year.

We must again call your attention to the needed improvements at the Almshouse. The main building needs a new roof badly, the shingles on the present roof being rotted, and entirely "used up." And the sills in the main building are rotted, and must be replaced, while part of the cellar wall has fallen in. And we repeat our request for an appropriation for building a new piazza in front of the women's sitting room. And there must be additions to the dining-room, and the men's sitting room, which is now overcrowded. Also, a yard or enclosure should be made where the insane could get out-door exercise in pleasant weather. The barn is in good condition, but if there were more storage room, more produce could be raised on the farm.

In regard to Mr. and Mrs. Shaw, the board considers that they have performed their duties faithfully, conscientiously and to the entire satisfaction of their employers, and of most of the inmates. In their management of the Almshouse they have been sagacious, far sighted and economical, although not stingy, and their tact in case of unruliness is most commendable.

RECOMMENDATION

The Board respectfully recommends that such a change be made in the city ordinances that the money expended on the poor of other towns and cities may, when paid back to this city, be credited to the poor department, instead of to the general funds.

We must also ask for the ensuing year, an appropriation for the out-door poor of $12,500; for the Almshouse, $7,500; and for necessary improvements on the Almshouse, not including water and drainage charges, $2000.

In closing we would make this suggestion: The main Almshouse building is old and rotten, and is no longer fitted to serve the purpose to which it is put. Besides this, it would

be, in case of fire, a death trap. The barn and the insane quarters are new, and are in good condition, but the main building is unsafe. So that some time in the not very distant future it will be necessary to provide a new building—a good, substantial, modern, brick structure we hope it will be. And if an abundant supply of water and good drainage cannot be provided for at the present location, would it not then be wise, would it not be economical in the end, to choose a new site, on the line of the water works and the sewer, and more accessible, instead of putting more money into the old farm over the West Street hills?
JOHN W. CLARK,
WILLIAM NUGENT,
CHARLES D. BEEBE,
Overseers of the Poor.
(Interesting note. Charles D. Beebe committed suicide in 1906. His coal company became my family's William A. Pierce Coal and Wood on New West Street)

Number of persons receiving temporary aid, and full support at state institutions:
There have been aided 206 families consisting of 762 persons, who were legally settled in this city; 41 families consisting of 162 persons settled in other cities and towns in this Commonwealth, 41 families consisting of 149 persons not having any settlement in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, making a total of 288 families of 1073 persons, 490 of which were males and 583 were females, 541 of that number were children under 16 years of age.
There were 9 children boarded in families, 6 part of the year and 3 the whole year and were continued Jan. 1, 1900.
There were 2 adults, one a feeble minded person boarding with a family in the town of Dalton at $1.00 per week. One was boarded for a short time and her friends removed her to Canada.
There have been 25 insane persons receiving full support at State Lunatic and Insane Hospitals, and Epileptic Hospital. Some parts of the year, 15 at Northampton Lunatic Hospital, 10 remaining Jan. 1, 1900, 2 at Medfield Insane Hospital and they were continued Jan. 1, 1900. One in each of Danvers and Westborough Insane Hospitals and were continued Jan. 1, 1900. There have been 5 persons at the Massachusetts Hospital for Epileptics part of the year, and 3 were continued Jan. 1, 1900.
The expense of 2 persons was reimbursed to the city treasurer by guardian and friends.
The expense of one other was reimbursed in part by friends.

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REPORT OF THE CITY PHYSICIAN.
To His Honor, the Mayor, and the Honorable City Council :
Gentlemen:—City Almshouse. For the year 1899, this establishment had in all about ninety-nine inmates. There had been the usual amount of sickness, but only of a chronic type, which we must always expect among the class of persons which such institutions harbor, and no epidemic. During the summer, a "Public Investigation" was instituted relative to the methods of government by the Superintendent.

About the wisdom or unwiseness of such an investigation, it is not my province perhaps to criticize but in my report to the City Government of 1893, under the head of "Discipline," I mentioned how necessary it was at times to use force, and on whom it might be found necessary, in order that the officers might be prepared to protect themselves as well as to protect the patients from injury. In this connection, I want to say a few words more about the institution and a special class of the inmates. Charitable institutions are always considered the landmarks which indicate the Christian Spirit of all communities, whether they are found in the village, town, city or state. But deeper and stronger than these, should be formed the ties of affection and love of the Christian family for each individual member of it. That was, I am led to believe, the old system, the family usually took care of and supported the aged, the maimed and the sick of their family circle, but now it appears that we have outgrown that old style of living and have adopted an entirely new one.

We find, at the present time, that as soon as a person, male or female, becomes disabled by age or infirmity, through which he or she becomes a burden to the family, they are immediately thrown upon the public charity of the community in which they live.
It goes without saying that there are cases so peculiarly circumstanced, that they become of necessity public charges, and must be taken care of by the community in which they have lived. We have such an institution for this latter class of people and I am confident that it is equal to any in the state for everything that goes to constitute an ideal home of this kind.
But there is one thing in clear evidence, that we have sent out to our city almshouse many cases whose relatives seem to be abundantly able to support them outside of this institution without making the general taxpayers do it. However, the heads of these departments whose duty is to examine all cases, may have good, valid reasons for admitting this class of cases.
Another aspect which should not be overlooked or forgotten is that we have in this institution an amalgamation of nations and these are commonly admitted when their mental faculties and bodily functions are failing and when, perhaps, the regrets of a life time are pondered over, which rarely sweeten the temper or disposition of these people. ' And again, many of these people never knew what it was to obey or observe any rule during their previous careers in the world; when, therefore, in the institution, they are compelled to obey rules and regulations which every well conducted establishment must have enforced and without which order could not be maintained, discipline exacted, or good government administered. Now, how can we expect that such a class of people could be governed without some friction, when orders are given which a few often refuse to obey, and indeed which government and obedience the relatives are willing to admit could not be put in practice at their homes?
I must say, then, that during my intercourse with the institution that William Shaw, in my opinion, has been as prudent, careful and discreet a man for the position of superintendent as could be selected.

INSANE.
In this department we have cases that sometimes require pretty rigid discipline, in order to keep them under proper control .

This class of insane are usually to be found among the males; they are persons physically strong and robust, but develop. the cunning, vicious and treacherous type of insanity. I am led to think that the examination made last summer has fully demonstrated the wisdom of excluding from the insane department of the City Almshouse, all cases where such characteristics are well marked.

WATER SUPPLY.

This is a subject which has been more or less discussed in former reports and surely very much has been done to supply this want since we became a city. Indeed the improvements made to increase the quantity of water would be quite sufficient for such an institution had it been located in a more favorable climate than ours.

The unfavorable conditions then may be briefly stated. First, the quantity of water in the spring over which the windmill has been erected is abundant for the demands of the institution until the summer months of July and August, when it has been found generally deficient in amount, when indeed it is so essential that a plentiful supply should be, had, as well for the safety of the buildings as for the use of the inmates. Second, It has been found that even if there should be enough of water, there is still the uncertainty of the necessary amount of wind to propel the fan of the windmill. This is a defect which cannot be remedied with the present kind of apparatus. These are
then the principal defects that experience has demonstrated within and for the past few years. We also find that as the population increases in number at the institution, the demand for a larger quantity of water also becomes greater. We here give a table taken from the record book of the City Almshouse.

This table shows the number of inmates for each year from the year 1875 to the year 1899. It shows the total number of persons who were there during the year, but net during the whole year.

Year	No
1875	27
1876	32
1877	34
1878	33
1879	35
1880	33
1881	33
1882	33
1883	33
1884	60
1885	61
1886	53
1887	49
1888	66
1889	72
1890	78
1891	56
1892	55

1893 62
1894 65
1895 77
1896 78
1897 90
1898 106
1899 99

Another source of demand, too, that should be noticed is that since Mr. Shaw has been appointed superintendent he not. only did well in that office, but he also proved to be an expert farmer. At the time he took charge there were seven head of cat tie; lie has, now, twenty; there were four horses; he now has five. As it seems there is no likelihood that the city will carry out the former plan of conveying the water through pipes from West Mountain, and as it has been suggested as the next best thing to remedy the deficiency would be the construction of a reservoir, north of the barn, of sufficient capacity to supply the needs of the institution for weeks, if necessary, or, at any. rate such an amount of storage as would bridge over those periods of calm when the windmill does not work. I here submit a list of the various places where water is used at the City Almshouse.
1. Laundry. Four days in each week; on each day that washing is done, the water used amounts to fifty barrels or the whole storage of the tanks, about 1800 gallons.
2. The small boiler used to generate direct steam, about twelve barrels a day or 384 gallons.
3. Four water closets; use about 180 gallons a day.
4. Six bath tubs; in these are given about sixty or seventy baths a week and each bath requires about 32 gallons of water.
5. Cattle: and Horses during the winter .months; use about 150 gallons a day.
It is estimated that the daily consumption of water at the institutions will average about 90 barrels. or about 2880 gallons. My principal object in presenting the above figures is to assist any future committee from the City Government who might have this subject under their consideration.
The following represents in tabular form the doings of this office for the year ending December 31, 1899.

CITY ALMSHOUSE.
Number of visits to City Almshouse, 43
Number of persons treated therein, 204
Number of deaths occurring therein, 8

OUTSIDE AID.
Number receiving professional services, 401
Number of professional visits made to same, 2669
Number of persons attended at police station, 23
Number of professional visits made to same, 30
Number of surgical cases, 9
Number of persons examined as to their sanity, 5
Number of certificates of insanity issued, 5

Number of women attended in child-birth, 6
Number of deaths, 8
Respectfully submitted,
W. M. MERCER, City Physician

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Almshouse 1900

Last edited Monday, March 09, 2026